



THINGS THEY BURIED

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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PROLOGUE: MALOOSE



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Mother was lost.

It seemed only moments ago Maloose had been tugging at the collar of his temple suit and wishing Mother would finish her dreary haggling when a curious sound drifted to him on the autumn air. He'd left off watching a young baluut chase a frisky seabird through the aftermid sky and closed his eyes, the creature's ovular shadow still visible against the sunbaked brightness behind his lids. When the muddled noise resolved into the pings, pongs, and hoots of a music box, his heart leapt. Something delightful was coming to relieve his boredom!

Maloose had stepped away from the spice-seller's booth then, away from Mother to scan the mixed crowd. A grinder emerged from amongst the shoppers, one hand winding the silver crank of the music box strapped to his chest, fingers of the other dancing over its pearly buttons. A crowd of laughing, clapping children trailed him like a school of minnows as he wound his way through the vendor-lined market path.

"O, the cat did dance for sailor's pants and was given nothin' but a skirt," the ruddy-faced karju man sang.

The grinder and his song were gloss, but Maloose was captivated by the white kitty leading the ragged parade. It wore a red cap and matching skirt that whirled gaily above its fluffy tail while it danced

and capered. It was the funniest thing Maloose had ever seen, and he had been there when old man Mushta's donkey ran right off a dock and swam all the way to the Prick.

Unable to resist the show, he'd drifted toward the group, clapping and smiling with the others.

When the grinder's song ended, the children chattered among themselves as they dispersed, and Maloose was left alone. He looked around. Nothing was as it should be. He'd intended to stop following at the first cross street, but he'd gone too far. The smile dropped from his face. Something in his core tightened and tears welled.

He hurried back down the narrow way, desperate to find the booth where he'd left her—or any of the booths they'd visited that day. Far ahead, he spotted a grey figure wearing a blue dress that looked like Mother's temple-best, the one she'd worn today. Maloose followed, turning corner after corner, calling to her until his target was lost in the blur of the mixed-species crowd. Still he hurried on, searching this way and that, chest so tight his breath came in short gasps. He tried to catch someone's eye, even tugged at a few shirtsleeves, but no one looked down. No one cared about a lost little chivori boy. Tears filled his long eyes and dribbled down his cheeks. It was hard to think.

Aftermid was fast fading into evening. Shopkeepers with strange faces flicked open the shutters on their glowing lumia signs and scowled at the boy lurking near their shops. Nothing here was right, nothing looked familiar.

He looked around in search of anything safe and spied a zoet parlor with a pop-eyed rabbit on its sign. Smiling people ambled in and out. Maloose started in to ask for help, but the door swung open, almost knocking him over. A hulking karju man with zoet horns and skin the color of strong tea stepped out with a growl. Maloose jumped from the man's path and ran down a nearby lane until it ended, the market and its crowds replaced by tall, unfamiliar buildings. Beyond, he heard surf breaking against the cliff-side. He

wasn't even sure he was still on the Big Island.

In the doorway of a shabby building, Maloose drew his knees close, buried his head in his arms, and wept.



It was cold when he woke. Blinking sleep from his eyes, Maloose turned his gaze down the sparsely occupied street. Handlers moved carts and crates to and from the buildings around him, their faces harsh and frightening beneath the streetlamps. He hoped Mother would be among them, ready to deliver one of her lectures on his foolishness. He'd take it with a smile and hug her tightly until she talked herself hoarse.

But she wasn't there. There was no lecture. There were no hugs. He'd lost her.

He sniffled, dragged the back of his hand across the fresh flow of tears running down his cheeks and whispered a prayer to the Duin that someone would arrive and rescue him.

In the dark space between two buildings, something stirred. A misty figure drifted out of the shadows. Maloose rubbed his eyes. It appeared almost to float toward him, but that couldn't be right. It glided closer, coalescing into a round old karju man in a checkered robe, his nearly bald head glinting in the streetlights almost as brightly as the array of gem-studded rings clogging his fingers. The old man's puffy pink face crinkled in a smile. He raised a hand, beckoning Maloose toward an alley that led to the enormous collection of conjoined towers Mother called the "desal plant."

Maloose stood but didn't move. He'd wished for a savior, and here was one. Things didn't work that way. Or so Mother always said. He took a hesitant step forward, bit his lip.

The man waggled plump fingers at Maloose, encouraging him to follow.

A distant street vendor shouted promises of the juiciest sausage

in town, and for a beat, Maloose looked away from the stranger toward the handlers packing their carts. The tightness of panic returned to his throat. His eyes snapped back to the old man. The workers didn't care, but this old gaffer did. Why?

Maloose nibbled at a fingernail.

The stranger might know where Mother was.

Yes, that was it. She must have sent someone to find him.

The man's smile widened, soft chins wrinkling beneath his jaw. The tension inside Maloose unwound like a clock spring. He took a small step forward, then another. The man bent and patted his thighs as if summoning a pet, then turned and wandered back into the darkness. Maloose glanced back down the street once more before hurrying after his new friend.

The alley curved along the plant wall to a narrow trail, overgrown with weeds and spotted with puddles of birdlime both dried and fresh. It wound down the cliff-side, so well camouflaged by time and nature that Maloose would have missed it altogether if not for the old man. In the dim light of the moons, he calculated his steps, leaping over gaps where rock and soil had crumbled into the sea, worrying he might encounter one too wide for him to dodge or, worse yet, the path would give way under the old man's bulk. His rescuer moved gracefully forward, though, oblivious to the boy's anxiety.

The grandfatherly figure stopped at a weather-worn door set into the cliff face, ajar just enough for a slight body to pass. He grinned and gestured Maloose inside.

Maloose paused, again nibbling his fingernail. This was an odd place for Mother to be. He glanced behind him. It was a long, dangerous way back for a little boy alone, but at least it was known, not strange and scary. As he bit his lip, mind flashing between the two pitiful options, Maloose became aware of a smell, one familiar and happy.

He sniffed deeply. Spices, sweetness, and comfort curled around him. Cookies. His mother's cookies were baking inside! She was in

there, waiting, wondering where her little boy was. This was what the old gaffer was trying to tell him. He looked up into the round, smiling face. The stranger tapped his snoot and nodded. The fear in Maloose's chest withered.

He scabbled forward and squeezed through the gap into a dim corridor. Weak moonlight eked through the cracks in the door, revealing two other children, a boy and a girl roughly the same age as he. Their eyes were blank, jaws slack. They looked a little ill.

This wasn't right. Maloose took a step back, ready to bolt when, as one, the children raised their arms and waved a greeting. Like a cool burst of wind, comfort washed over him. They too had been lost. The old man had helped them, just as he helped Maloose, and now they were here to make him feel welcome. He just hoped Mother had made enough cookies for all three of them.

Maloose hurried further in, barely aware of the soft swish from the darkness above. Before he reached his new playmates, something warm and firm and terrible slammed into his skull.

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